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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000839

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS), NEA/PI AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/25/2017
TAGS: PGOV KDEM PHUM SOCI TS
SUBJECT: BEN ALI GIVES INDEPENDENT NGO CASH GIFT

REF: A. TUNIS 770

1B. 06 TUNIS 1421
1C. 06 TUNIS 388

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) AND (d)

11. (C) In early June, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), an authorized and independent NGO active in debating and publicizing women's issues, received a TD 50,000 (approximately US \$40,000) gift from President Ben Ali. While focused primarily on social issues, ATFD leaders have at times been outspoken critics of the restriction on political freedoms in Tunisia, and reported that the GOT has blocked their meetings, frozen foreign funding and instructed hotels not to rent space for ATFD public events (Refs B and C). ATFD President Khedija Cherif told PolOff on June 21 that she believes the gift was the result of a recent meeting she and other ATFD members had with Moncer Rouissi, President of the GOT's Higher Commission on Human Rights and Civil Liberties (HCHR, Ref A). (NOTE: Cherif, a sociology professor and long-time civil society activist, was a recipient of the Secretary's 2007 Woman of Courage Award. END NOTE.) Noting that she had worked as Rouissi's university assistant, Cherif said this personal relationship likely contributed to the gift. "Rouissi knows me and what the ATFD stands for," said Cherif, highlighting that the ATFD is a secular, apolitical organization promoting women's rights in Tunisia; goals not dissimilar from the GOT's.

12. (C) The money, combined with some recently unfrozen EU funding, will allow the ATFD to conduct several planned campaigns, including one focused on increasing youth membership. Cherif stressed that the Presidential gift will not change the ATFD's position on the need for increased public discourse and political space to debate the challenges Tunisia faces today. While some in the GOT may be reform minded, Cherif stressed that the majority of officials still prefer the "security" approach of cracking down on independent civil society.

13. (C) COMMENT. Although some of the ATFD's goals overlap with the GOT's, it has long been an independent and vocal GOT critic. Thus, the gift is unique as it was not tied to any changes in the organization's leadership or activities. As Cherif indicated, it appears that HCHR President Rouissi was responsible for solving a year-long ATFD funding crisis. Post will continue to engage Rouissi, following Ambassador's June 11 courtesy call, and others in the GOT to promote the independence of civil society. END COMMENT.

GODEC